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ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore reasons why girls tend to be less satisfied with their gender-prescribed roles than are boys. Three groups of female tertiary students with a mean age of 20 (146 upper middle-class Anglo-Australians, 71 working-class Anglo-Australians, and 89 working-class Italian-Australians) were compared in a study of the influence of class and culture on self-esteem, life-satisfaction, and a number of measures associated with gender. There were no significant differences between the groups on any measure of self-esteem or life satisfaction, but the Italian-Australians were significantly less satisfied with their gender than were the two other groups. The three groups placed equally high value on working outside the home and perceived themselves as moderately ambitious. The working-class Anglo- and Italian-Australian women had greater commitment to tertiary studies than did their upper middle-class peers. There were few differences between the two Anglo-Australian groups, suggesting that at least for young women who choose to pursue tertiary studies, social class is not an important variable when feelings about their gender, themselves, and satisfaction with their lives is examined. In contrast, the cultural comparison yielded differences on a number of measures associated with gender. (ABL)

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The University of Melbourne

Paper presented to the 5th National Conference on Child Development, Sydney, August, 1988.

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I'm Not Sure I Enjoy Being A Girl:
Satisfaction with Gender Related to Class and Ethnicity

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ABSTRACT

Three groups of female tertiary students, upper middle-class Anglo-Australians, working-class Anglo-Australians, and working-class Italian-Australians, were compared in a study of the influence of class and culture on self-esteem, life-satisfaction, and a number of measures associated with gender.

There were no significant difference between the groups on any measure of self-esteem or life satisfaction, but the Italian-Australians were significantly less satisfied with their gender than were the other two groups. Italian-Australian young women were more religious, more romantic, and had more traditional attitudes to motherhood and the role of women in society than Anglo-Australians. They also perceived themselves to be more feminine and less masculine than the other two groups. The three groups placed equally high value on working outside the home and perceived themselves as moderately ambitious. However the working-class Anglo- and Italian-Australian women had greater commitment to tertiary studies than did their upper middle class peers.

There were few differences between the two Anglo-Australian groups, suggesting that at least for young women who choose to pursue tertiary studies, social class is not an important variable when feelings about their gender, about themselves, and their satisfaction with their lives are examined. In contrast, the cultural comparison yielded differences on a number of measures associated with gender.

Introduction

There is a relatively long tradition of research in the United States which has shown that girls are less satisfied with their gender prescribed roles than are boys. Moreover, the older these girls become, the more dissatisfied they are. It seems that, as girls learn about the world in which they live, they realize that theirs is a relatively disadvantaged position. There is, indeed, a wealth of evidence to suggest that girls' and 'female' activities are downgraded relative to those of males and that "feminine" personality characteristics are valued less than are "masculine" ones.

In our present research, we have sought to explore some of the reasons underlying these feelings of less satisfaction and, at the same time, to clarify this concept of sex-role satisfaction. One question which arises is whether these findings are culture-bound, based as they are on North American samples. If we were to compare girls in such non-traditional cultures, where individualistic values prevail and where there are relatively egalitarian attitudes towards males and females, especially in terms of family practices and expectations, with girls from traditional societes where sex roles are clearly differentiated, would we find similarities or differences on gender-related measures such as satisfaction with their sex-role?

As well, what <u>are</u> the factors associated with sex-role satisfaction and are these factors the same across cultures?

These are the questions, among others, that we have explored in two recent studies, one of adolescent girls, the other of young women engaged in tertiary studies.

Our interest in this issue was aroused by a study by Burns and Homel (1986). We focussed particularly on their comparison of Anglo-Australian and non-Anglo-Australian (Mediterranean) boys and girls aged 9 - 11 years. Of special interest was their finding that non-Anglo and Anglo girls did not differ in levels of self-esteem and life-satisfaction, but the non-Anglos were significantly more satisfied with being girls. (However both groups had relatively high levels of satisfaction, albeit lower than boys for the Anglo sample only). Burns and Homel interpreted these findings in terms of the greater value accorded to women's roles in Mediterranean cultures and to the differential socialization of girls towards a sex-role that emphasizes moral qualities and places little importance on sport, thus lessening competition on disadvantageous terms with males.

In our first study (Grieve, Rosenthal, and Cavallo,1988), we extended Burns and Homel's work by focussing on adolescents, on one traditional culture (Italian), and on exploring in more detail the correlates of sex-role satisfaction. We compared these 16-year-old girls of Italian descent with a group of Anglo-Celtic adolescents. Again, we found no differences between the two groups in levels of self-esteem and life-satisfaction (both relatively high) but neither did we find the expected differences in sex-role satisfaction. However, when we turned to the correlates of sex-role satisfaction, we found significant differences between the groups. For the Italian-Australian girls, external factors such as the differential treatment of boys and girls within the family, and resentment about this treatment were associated with less satisfaction with their

sex-role. For the Anglo-Australian girls, evaluation of their sex-roles was associated with how well they judged they were measuring up, relative to their female peers, in intellectual abilities , in physical attractiveness, and maturity. The Anglo-Australian girls seemed to be more internalized in that they were satisfied with being girls when they were more satisfied with themselves in terms of perceived competence and general attractiveness. The Italian-Australian girls were more externalized in that they seemed to be satisfied with being girls when they were not suffering sex discrimination.

So, comparing our results for adolescents with the earlier study of young girls (where differences in favour of girls from traditional cultures were found) we get a shift in levels of satisfaction with their gender-role for the girls from a more traditional culture, relative to their less traditional peers.

While we felt that the internal-external distinction was a useful one, on reflection we recognized that we had not tapped into other aspects of traditionality in the culture which might support a positive attitude to their gender role for these Italian-Australian girls.

Accordingly, we planned our next study to include measures of attitudes to some of these traditionally female preoccupations, such a marriage and motherhood.

Method

Three groups of tertiary students were sampled: (a)upper middle-class Anglo-Australians (UA-A:N=146), (b)working-class Anglo-Australians (WA-A:N=71), (c) working-class Italian-Australians (WI-A:N=89). Thus we were able to make within-culture class comparisons, and within-class cultural comparisons.

All Anglo-Australians (young women whose parents were of Anglo-Celtic descent) and 96% of Italian-Australians (parents born in Italy) were born in Australia. The mean age of the sample was 20 years, with the UA-A young women, on average, about one year younger than the other groups. Respondents were recruited from universities and Colleges of Advanced Education. They completed a questionnaire which contained the following measures.

1. **GENDER-RELATED**

   (a) Sex-Role Satisfaction (8 items) e.g., "I feel life would have been easier if I had been born male".

   (b) Australian Sex-role Scale (ASRS, Antill et al., 1981)

   (c) Attitude to Women in Society (Lewis, 1986; 14 items) e.g., "Women are more suited than men to detailed and routine jobs."

   (d) Attitude to Marriage (from Glezer, 1984; 8 items) e.g., "A wife should go where her husband wants her to go for his job."

   (e) Attitude to Motherhood (from Glezer, 1984 and Jensen et al., 1985; 7 items) e.g., "I feel that being a mother is not a full time job."

   (f) Romanticism (14 items) e.g., "I believe that true happiness cannot be achieved without love."

2. **SELF-ESTEEM**

   (a) Global Self-Esteem (Rosenberg, 1965)

   (b) Facets of Self-Esteem (from Marsh, 1986)

   Opposite-sex relations

   Same-sex relations

Physical appearance

Physical ability

General academic ability

For each facet, ratings were obtained of the importance of the facet.

3. **LIFE-SATISFACTION** (Bowen, 1982; 6 Items) e.g., "How do you feel about your social life in general?"

4. **RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT** (7 items) e.g., "My religious beliefs provide the guidelines by which I conduct my life."

5. **ITALIAN IDENTIFICATION** (3 items) e.g., "How 'Italian' do you consider yourself?"

6. **CAREER/WORK - RELATED**

   (a) Ambition (1 item) "How ambitious would you say you are compared with other women of your age?"

   (b) Commitment to Work (from Gerson, 1985; 7 items) e.g., "I do not think that working outside the home would give my life more meaning."

   (c) Commitment to Tertiary Studies (4 items) e.g., "Overall, how committed are you to completing your course?"

* Where no reference is cited, measures were developed by the present authors.

Results

All scales had satisfactory internal reliability measured by Cronbach's alpha.

There were no significant differences between the groups on any measures of self-esteem, or life satisfaction, consistent with our earlier study of adolescents and with Burns and Homel. Levels of self-esteem and life-satisfaction were moderate to high. It is also interesting that the groups did not differ in their commitment to work, their level of ambition or their attitudes to marriage. So we have a sample of young women who are satisfied with themselves and their lives, and who express a strong commitment to the value of work outside the home.

Insert Table 1 about here

Where differences were found between the groups, these fell into two areas. First, the working-class young women, both Anglo- and Italian-Australian, were more committed to their studies than were their upper-middle-class peers (see Table 1). The Italian-Australians also rated general academic ability as more important than did the Anglo-Australians. These results suggest that academic competence and commitment are more highly valued by working-class students, and especially the Italian-Australians, than by the young women from more affluent homes. Overall, though, these students were highly committed to their chosen courses, with clear expectations for a job or career outside the home subsequently.

The other area where consistent differences between the groups emerged was in the gender related measures. Italian-Australian young women had significantly more traditional attitudes to motherhood and to the role of women in society than did their Anglo-Australian peers. They were more romantic, more traditionally sex-typed, and placed more importance on physical appearance. As well, they were more committed to religion than were the Anglo-Australian students.

So, we have a picture of cultural differences with respect to gender which are clearly more potent than class differences. Italian-Australians, in spite of their pursuit of tertiary studies, in spite of their equal commitment to study and a career, are more traditionally "feminine" than their fellow students of Anglo-Celtic descent.

The final difference which emerged between the cultural groups, and one which provides us with something of a puzzle, is that the Italian-Australians reported significantly lower levels of satisfaction with their gender than did the Anglo-Australian young women, although all three groups were well above the mid-point on this scale. How, then, to explain this finding, which differs from those of the earlier studies? What meaning can we attach to this developmental shift, with Italian-Australian girls (or girls from traditional cultures?) experiencing declining satisfaction, relative to their peers in non-traditional cultures?

An explanation is not readily provided by the present data. A potential for greater dissatisfaction in the

Italian-Australian students is suggested by the conjunction of what on the face of it appear to be contradictory attitudes, namely an endorsement of both individualistic and other directed projects. The Italian-Australian students report more traditional attitudes to marriage, motherhood, and woman's place in society yet believe in working outside the home. They are as ambitious as their Anglo-Australian peers, but in addition, give greater importance to academic ability and are more committed to study (in company with the lower socio-economic Anglo-Australina students). However, none of these measures correlates with sex-role satisfaction. The more traditional young women are not more satisfied nor are the more ambitious less satisfied.

In the study of secondary students, the Italian-Australian students differed from the Anglo-Australians in that the main correlates of dissatisfaction were under-the-roof irritations such as the different treatment of girls and boys by parents. This measure was not included in the present study since it was assumed that it would not be appropriate for tertiary students. However it now appears that it may be particularly relevant to this tertiary sample. We find that the Italian-Australian sample are, overwhelmingly, still living with their parents (93 percent). Only 60 percent of the Anglo-Australian girls are still living at home.

Furthermore, we know that considerable restrictions are placed by Italian-Australian parents on the social activities of their adult daughters, although these costs are balanced by benefits e.g., the provision of a car.

Heterosexual relations are controlled and supervised as is overnight absence from home. These practices differ markedly from those experienced by their Anglo-Australian peers and Italian-Australian male peers. As well, there is a strong expectation that the young women will remain at home until marriage. Thus the greater dissatisfaction of the Italian-Australian young women is predictable if one assumes that they are nov encountering greater discrepancy with the dominant, less traditional culture than they have previously experienced. This interpretation, which can be tested, is consistent with the secondary school findings which suggested an internal/external difference in the causes of sex-role dissatisfaction in the two cultures. In both that study and the present one, sex role satisfaction was associated with higher levels of self-esteem in the Anglo-Australian samples. In the Italian-Australian samples, we find no such link between this 'internal' measure and satisfaction with being a female.

This suggests that the higher levels of sex-role dissatisfaction may be ephemeral in young adult Italian-Australian samples in that they are dependent on present external social constraints and may disappear when the young woman can legitimately leave her family of origin. An alternative and more probable outcome is that relative sex-role dissatisfation will continue. The long arm of the family may extend beyond marriage and may be joined by the equally long arm of her spouse's family in controlling a young woman's behaviour.

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Table 1

Mean scores of three groups on measures which yielded significant differences

Measure	UA-A (1)	WA-A (2)	WI-A (3)	Post-hoc comparisons
Importance of acad. abil.	6.77	6.79	7.28	(1=2)≠3
Commitment to study	22.51	23.94	24.34	1≠(2=3)
Attitude to motherhood[1]	27.45	28.32	31.22	(1=2)≠3
Women in society	29.60	28.35	34.32	(1=2)≠3
Romanticism	33.85	32.49	37.25	(1=2)≠3
ASRS M+	4.58	4.66	4.22	(1=2)≠3
ASRS M-	3.47	3.43	2.92	(1=2)≠3
ASRS F+	5.30	5.31	5.61	(1=2)≠3
ASRS F-	3.84	3.65	4.07	1≠2,1≠3
Importance of physical appearance	6.43	6.04	6.83	1≠2,1≠3
Religious commitment	18.12	19.51	22.38	1≠2,2≠3
Sex-role satisfaction	40.15	40.30	36.92	(1=2)≠3

[1] High score = traditional attitude